

“Animal Tracks” by Sally Cureton

This year’s Farmers Almanac predicts that we will to get a fair amount of snow this season. With that in mind, a fun thing to think about is animal tracks in the winter. Determining not only what kind of an animal made the print and where was it going and what was it doing can be a great winter project for everyone. By looking carefully at an animal’s tracks it is possible to figure out a great many things about its activities. The first step is to think about what kinds of animals live in our area that would be stepping out in the snow. These could be deer, fox, squirrel, bird, rabbit, or the neighborhood dog. Here’s some help getting started.

1. If there are four toes on each of the front and the hind feet, it is a track made by a member of the dog, cat or rabbit family. These include fox, coyote, the neighborhood cat, or a wild rabbit. If the paw print has small triangular marks in front of it, those are claw marks often left by raccoons, skunks, coyotes, foxes or dogs. Cats retract their claws when they walk. The forefeet of the dog are larger than the hind feet and support more of it’s weight and so leave the clearest tracks.
2. Four toes on the front foot and five toes on the hind foot will tell you that you are following a rodent such as a mouse, vole, chipmunk, squirrel or woodchuck.
3. With five toes in the front and the back, you have found something from the bear, raccoon or weasel family. In our area, this could include a skunk or opossum. The racoon leaves an unusual print which will show five well-formed toes and looks like a human handprint. The oppussum print may look similar, but it drags its tail, so you will see that line between the paw prints. The skunk is going to make very small prints in a random pattern. A bear print is going to look like a small human print, but wider with claw marks.
4. A two toed track is probably a deer.

Another clue is to figure out if your animal is a hopper. As a squirrel bounds along, their larger hind feet land ahead of their smaller front feet. In a rabbit track the hind feet also land ahead of the front feet, but the front feet are not going to be next to each other. And, if you can see where the snow is pushed back by the animal’s feet, you can figure out what direction it came from.

So the next time it snows here, think about heading out to the woods to do a little sluthing - it can be a lot of fun.

In the plant world, an interesting topic is where some of the names came from. One of the favorite plants in the Rockingham Springs Arboretum is the columbine. This name comes from the Latin *columba* (dove). If held upside down, the flower looks a little like a ring of doves drinking. In old paintings and tapestries, the columbine represented the dove of peace. It can be seen in the grassy foregrounds of many religious works. In medieval times it was called the “herbe wherein the Lion dooth delight” because it was believed that these animals liked to eat it.

Another interesting plant is the foxglove, botanical name *digitalis*, family, *Scrophulariaceae*. These plants, native to Europe, are sometimes called fairy bells, or ladies’ thimble. The name comes from the Old English *foxes glofa*, since the flowers tend to look like the fingers of a glove. They tend to grow on woody slopes where a fox is likely to make his burrow. After the medicinal properties of this plant were discovered in the eighteenth century, it was imported to America. It has beautiful flowers that come in many colors, although the original ones were purple.

Another plant that can be found in the Arboretum is the Virginia bluebell, *Mertensia virginica*. Its lush blue flowers turn one area of the woods into a wonderland each spring. Its botanical name comes from Franz Karl Mertens, a German botanist, who actually has little to do with finding the plant. It was first discovered in the damp Virginia woodlands by John Banister, a young clergyman. He died while looking for other plants, reportedly shot by a soldier who mistook him for a wild animal.

We all know mountain laurel which is to be found on many of our slopes. Early Swedish settlers used its hard wood to make spoons and trowels. It was also used for weavers’ shuttles and to make the axles of pulleys. When first discovered by the English they called it a “laurel” tree, but it is a member of the heath, not laurel family. Other members of the heath family include Rhododendron and Azalea. The leaves of all members of this family contain a poison called andromedotoxin. The flowers of the mountain laurel have no scent, but their beautiful flowers make up for this lack.

We may not be able to see these flowers this time of year, but just thinking about them can brighten up any day.

Enjoy our winter wonderland!